

Rethinking The Iraq Obsession

*The Military Strikes Mask
The Real Mideast Crisis*

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By Christine Helms

PRESIDENT CLINTON is about to discover that he has not inherited a tranquil Middle East. Regional allies are keeping a discreet distance from the American-led coalition against Iraq. Most viewed the recent use of force against Saddam Hussein as a counter-productive form of behavior modification. None, save Kuwait, lauded the imposition of the "no-fly" zone over southern Iraq.

Saddam, in fact, has come to be seen as a pretext for Western, especially American, intervention in the region. He is politically isolated. His ground forces have been mauled and Iraq's arsenal of mass destruction almost dismantled. Ethnic and religious conflict and concern about Iran preoccupies its military. Its economy is in shambles. Adult life-spans have been reduced. Infant mortality has increased. The lives of an additional 70,000 Iraqi children under the age of 5 are at risk. Diseases once eradicated

have returned.

George Bush rightfully can take credit for ejecting Iraqi forces from Kuwait and destroying weapons of mass destruction. But Clinton will find that the New World Order that resulted is stillborn, and exceedingly costly. Operation Desert Storm cost \$200 billion in direct outlays; in addition, there were the hidden costs of attracting other states to join the coalition. Egypt, for example, got half its \$55 billion debt canceled or delayed—someone, somewhere paid for that. And there were hundreds of other deals. The no-fly zone over just southern Iraq costs \$700,000 daily. The 40 Tomahawk missiles launched last weekend cost \$80 million.

Yet Saddam, alternately dangling and spitting in the wind, lingers, even as U.N. resolutions sanction unprecedented international interference in a state's internal affairs.

Those in the region have increasingly viewed the postwar sanctions as an incentive for someone to oust Saddam. But those suffering most from coalition reprisals aimed at securing Saddam's capitulation are 18 million Iraqis. Many, ironically, are now more fearful that a post-Saddam era will be bloody as Iraq's many ethnic and religious groups seek retribution and political advantage. They also fear the loss of Iraq as the

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eastern flank of the Arab world at a time when Iran is muscle-flexing yet again.

It is a justifiable fear, for along with Saddam's longevity and Iraq's downward spiral, the tapestry of Middle East politics has changed. Consider, for example, the following dangerous demographic trends: The Arab region's population will double from 250 to 500 million around 2010 if present growth rates continue unchecked. Iran's population of 55 million is expected to double earlier than that. Malnutrition and famine affect areas such as Sudan, where a third of 24 million people are at risk. Environmental degradation threatens lives and livelihoods in regions like the Mediterranean. Of greater import, some 70 percent of the Middle East population is under 20 years of age.

The economic picture is also bleak. The Gulf War is estimated to have cost the Arab world more than \$600 billion, three times the region's combined debt. Tourism, an important revenue source, has declined. Inflation is staggering. Unemployment is high. About 50 percent of Algeria's young adults are said to be unemployed, and one unofficial estimate asserts a similar percentage among Saudi Arabia's young and highly educated. Aid to poorer Arab states from the six Arab oil-rich states, whose combined population is only 18 million of the region's 250 million, declined sharply from \$9.5 billion in 1980 to \$1.5 billion by 1989. The weakness of financial institutions is evidenced by bank failures and the BCCI scandal, which has tainted Saudi financiers and the ruling family of Abu Dhabi.

Contrary to expectations, the so-called death of the Arab League after the war has not made political life pliant to Western in-

fluence. The region has not sub-divided into more pragmatic sub-regional groupings but into antagonistic oil-exporting and oil-importing states—the rich and the poor. And even these alliances are fluid and dangerous. For example, at least three oil-exporting states will become energy importers, shift to gas production or produce only domestic supplies during the next decade.

All countries, including oil-rich hereditary states, are beset with problems of political succession. Libya and Iran are ever-present specters. Even Saudi Arabia, slated to receive \$10 billion in advanced U.S. fighter aircraft, has tried to claim control over oil-rich Yemeni territory—and last October, it seized a Qatari outpost. Increasing competition for scarce resources—especially water—increases the likelihood of regional conflict. Many of the regions' youth, lifelong victims of political violence who will inherit the reins of government, now justify violence as a necessary evil. Repression is institutionalized.

All of which means that U.S. allies today may not be there tomorrow.

Arms control initiatives in the post-Gulf War period also had a short, bright life. Less than a year after major global players agreed to limit arms sales to the region, each was driven by the primacy of economic need over regional alliances to sell now and justify later. About \$46 billion in arms were purchased by Middle East countries between the end of the Gulf War and October 1992. The United States accounted for half of these sales. Russia, reportedly earning \$750 million from submarine sales to Iran, argued the sale would not affect the region's balance of power. China is implicated in several deals to sell nuclear technology in the region.

The Palestinian movement is becoming increasingly polarized. Yasser Arafat's close call in an airplane crash last year spurred

questions about the future leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the "moderate" and accepted Palestinian mouthpiece with whom Israel has refused to negotiate (although the Israeli parliament has now approved "contacts" with the PLO). Yet by the time an Arab-Israeli peace treaty is signed, its carefully vetted signers may not be Palestine's "mainstream" representatives. Palestinians belonging to ever-more-popular radical Islamic groups, such as Hamas, have launched bloody attacks against PLO adherents in Israel and the occupied territories and against Israeli civilians and security forces.

Human rights are under increasing attack. Interior ministers of many Arab coalition states recently met to discuss the containment of Islamic fundamentalists, thousands of whom have been arbitrarily jailed this past year. Ironically, during rare free elections over the last several years, "pro-Islam" candidates won stunning victories. Moreover, the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights, one of the most respected advocacy groups in the region, disbanded in 1992 rather than adhere to a new law that would have resulted in government control of the organization. Kuwait continues a pattern of arbitrary expulsions and mistreatment of immigrant workers. And the Saudi ruling family is increasingly criticized at home by Islamic sympathizers.

The Gulf War also exacerbated problems for America's allies. Turkey is a prime case. It received compensation for only one-quarter of the \$7 billion debt it incurred from joining the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq. It daily loses revenues from not transshipping Iraqi crude at a time when it faces a plethora of new domestic problems: Bulgarian refugees, uncertainty from Central Asia, concern for emigrant Turks in Germany. Moreover, coalition protection extended to Iraqi Kurds gave new impetus to Turkey's Marxist Kurdish Workers' Party, which has sought an independent state since 1984. Midway through 1992, at least 1,300 had died in clashes between Kurds and government forces. This prompted Turkey to dou-

ble its military force along its southeastern border to over 130,000 and launch massive assaults against Kurdish guerrillas.

Perhaps the greatest threat since the Gulf War are Iran's revitalized hegemonic ambitions. Spending more on military equipment during the last three years than during the last decade, Iran has encouraged Islamic revolution in North Africa, the Arabian peninsula, Turkey, Afghanistan and elsewhere. This encouragement includes military advisers and financial aid to Sudan, which began a bloody campaign against its non-Muslim and non-Arab populations.

Iran attempted to send arms to Bosnia's beleaguered Muslims; pro-Iranian groups have been recently implicated in terrorist attacks in the Middle East, Latin America, Europe and Asia. Most recently, despite Arab League objections, Iran claimed sovereignty over three islands in the Persian Gulf also claimed by the United Arab Emirates. Anyone who calls Iran's leadership "moderate" needs to apply for a reality check.

No doubt the world would be a better place without Saddam Hussein, but then there are lots of people the world would be better off without. U.N. officials have said that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction have been destroyed except for an arsenal of chemical material and, in time, that too will be gone. Demonizing Saddam has already cost plenty in human and financial terms, and the cost could climb greatly. If Iraq were to be fragmented, the result could be the "Lebanonization" of Iraq and its neighboring countries.

Unfortunately, excepting the Iraqi military, none of the opposition groups outside Iraq is credible. Iraqi Kurdish guerrillas, for example, robbed their own people during the uprisings and forced Assyrians from their homes. In October 1991 they killed at point-blank range 60 unarmed Iraqi policemen who had surrendered. Most recently, they even helped Turkey hunt down Turkish Kurds. So far, the picture of "enlightened" Kurdish rule isn't pretty.

The new administration should be especially attentive of increasing Islamic fundamentalism. A policy that would offer an olive branch ignores the fact that the thrust of many of these movements is vehemently anti-West.

In the face of these challenges, worrying about Saddam's longevity and which direction an inspection plane flies into Iraq is akin to worrying about mice when elephants are stampeding. Saddam should not be confused with Iraq or Iraqis, and the United States will not have stability in the Middle East until it brings Iraq in from the cold.

Yet there is some good news for Clinton, who enters this drama with no historical baggage. Bush has shown that the United States carries a big stick and postures as well as Saddam. Clinton, though, has nothing to prove. And clear lessons that have arisen from the gulf conflict may act as a road map for the foreseeable future.

- Saddam has been neutered, but there are other Saddams in the offing. The United States should plan today instead of reacting tomorrow. It should also realize that without an Arab-Israeli peace agreement, any talk of arms control is bound to be hollow.

- Decreeing democratic ideals is easier than internalizing and institutionalizing them. Exporting democracy to the Middle East in the absence of an Arab-Israeli peace agreement is almost certain to promote Islamic radicalism and anti-Americanism.

- U.S. vision is cynically viewed when it is seen only as an attempt to secure its own narrowly defined interests.

- The hardest job in the world is tailoring military force to achieve a specific political end. The use of overwhelming force may win battles, but lose a war.

- Divide-and-conquer had a certain gut-level appeal in colonial times, but is inappropriate now. Encouraging a state's fragmentation for America's short-term tactical ends will ultimately be counter-productive, especially in a world already suffering the moral hemorrhage of ethnic conflict. After all, nothing grows in a desert but thorns.